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ABSTRACT

Writing is an effective tool for investigating the problem of ethnic stereotyping, that is, grouping people from diverse cultures into broad unrepresentative categories. A first-year composition class addressed ethnic stereotyping using media critique. Class activities divided the process of deconstructing cultural stereotypes into three steps: identification of stereotypes in the media; critique of the media presentation; and personal reflection. Students investigated their own experiences with ethnic prejudice; viewed and discussed a television clip from "The Simpsons"; and kept journals over a 4-week period of stereotypical images they found in various media. In class, students viewed movies or sitcoms, and compared firsthand knowledge with media representation. Writing assignments asked them to analyze and evaluate (using specific examples) how the ethnic group or culture represented was being portrayed. Responses of some students indicate how the knowledge of media stereotyping changed their beliefs and attitudes and promoted an awareness of and a sensitivity to the detrimental effects of media stereotypes. (SR)

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# Deconstructing Cultural Stereotypes Through Media Critique

by Karen Power

Critique takes many forms. As Tracy and Stephanie have presented today, writing ethnography and parody are two ways we, as classroom teachers, can use writing as a tool to help students evaluate the cultural values and ideals of the society in which we live. Writing is also an effective tool for investigating the problem of grouping people from diverse cultures into broad unrepresentative categories, that is, ethnic stereotyping.

The problem of ethnic stereotyping is everywhere. As I surveyed the students of my first year composition class, I was not surprised to read that most openly admitted to stereotyping peoples of other cultures. And honestly, whether it be consciously or unconsciously, we've all done it. [The French are romantic. Latins are fun loving. Jews are good business people. Colombians are drug dealers. Poles are stupid. American women are loose.] Stereotyping is dangerous whether or not the image is positive or negative because these images become collective judgments. Yes, we make judgments; we adopt attitudes. Based on those two factors, we make decisions. We make choices. We may choose to marry a Puerto Rican, but not an Ugandan. We may choose to live in Little Italy, but not China Town. We may choose to distance ourselves from other ethnic groups. Social distancing is not the only problem stereotyping causes, however. Research suggests that stereotyping leads to prejudice, discrimination and, ultimately, racism. As I read through my students' papers about their personal experiences with people from other

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cultures in America, I noted some students were sympathetic, some apathetic, but others nurtured a clear prejudice against them. Our focus as a class, then, was to address ethnic stereotyping. My goal was to deconstruct cultural stereotypes. I hoped, if not to correct biased and apathetic judgments, at least to minimize their effects and possibly effect change in the lives of my students. The means I selected was the media.

Why Media Critique

Traditionally, literature has been our resource for learning about other cultures and investigating cultural stereotyping. Play, novels, poems, short stories have provided us with rich sources of material to help students critique the injustice of grouping people from diverse cultures into unrepresentative categories. But today, in our contemporary culture, another resource exists which touches lives by the masses, and thus holds a greater potential for societal change--the media. For years, foreign language teachers have been using newspapers, magazines, films, and commercials to bring their students to a cultural understanding of other peoples. More recently, first year composition instructors have tapped into this resource as a result of a growing interest in cultural studies. Textbooks such as Reading Culture, Rereading America, and Signs of Life in the USA ask students to read and write about everyday life in America. Articles in these texts about the media--television culture, popular music, journalism, advertising--are designed to promote critical distancing by asking students to observe and evaluate those aspects of contemporary American culture in which they participate. Yes, the media exists as a

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tremendous resource for studying culture, and every aspect of culture including ethnic stereotyping.

Yet an even greater motivation exists for deconstructing cultural stereotypes through media critique. What is a potential resource for creating empathy for other cultures is also the vehicle by which these stereotypic images are perpetuated.

The media, especially advertisers, has a long history of employing stereotypes. Frito-Lay launched a very successful campaign with its chubby Mexican thief, the Frito Bandito. The Bandito, sporting a handlebar mustache and packing a pair of pistols, warned TV commercial viewers that he loved "cronchy" Frito corn chips and would stop at nothing to get some. While Frito-Lay sold a lot of chips, the ads sparked outrage among the members of the Mexican-American community who charged that the ad carried a racist message that Mexicans are sneaky thieves (Nuirty, par. 5). While such deplorable advertisements ended in the seventies, modern negative images still exist, yet are more subtle. In the 1993, Taco Bell "Make a Run for the Border" spot, who was "running for the border"? Mexican immigrants already blamed in Southwest states for unemployment and economic depression? The current very popular Taco Bell commercial with the Chihuahua who says, "Yo quiero Taco Bell" has been accused of demeaning Mexicans.

While advertisers, out of economic motivation, are more sensitive to the complaints of ethnic consumers, film and television producers seem to have little compunction about casting other cultures in those stereotypical images which best suits a

good plot. Who are the bad guys in Clear and Present Danger? The Colombian drug lords. Who are the bad guys in Air Force One? A group of Russian terrorists. Who are the bad guys in The Saint? The Russian Mafia. But who are the good guys who save the earth from destruction in Independence Day? The Americans.

Ethnic groups in TV genre have played both the bad guy and the good. Edward James Olmos in Miami Vice, starring as Lt. Martin Castillo stood in stark contrast to the show's many Latino drug operatives. In current TV sitcom programming, Apu, the Indian entrepreneur on The Simpsons owns the Quickie Mart. On King of the Hill, Hank Hill's neighbor, Khan, is the rude Laotian who makes his daughter, Khan, Jr. practice violin for five hours a day. So, what affect does media stereotyping have on us? Here's a personal response from one of my first year comp students:

> I would definitely say that the media today is responsible for a lot of negative stereotyping, but they do it in such a manner that most do not notice. [The media] presents stereotypes in an amusing manner [referring to sitcoms], so the viewer doesn't notice that he/she is accepting these stereotypes. When I watch TV, I find myself more unaware than when I read a book. Television definitely has an affect on me because things that I wouldn't normally agree with such as cultural stereotyping, are made amusing to me so it becomes more acceptable.

Then, how was I to minimize these negative effects and maximize the potential for societal change? How was I to deconstruct cultural stereotyping in the media? Through critique.

Why Critique (the theory)



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Critique initiates the deconstruction process. Critique itself is initiated by higher level thinking activity. Thus, critique precludes the use of cognitive skills. Media critique is especially effective because it involves a social construct as well. The effectiveness of critique to raise the critical consciousness of students to be meaningful on a social level is well founded in the theories of Paulo Freire. Literacy, for Freire, is very much embodied in critical thinking. Education is not an act of "depositing information" into the minds of the students (Freire 53), but a dialogic, dialectic process between teacher and student. According to Freire, effective critical thinking, however, requires the conscious consideration of social context. The learner's environment plays a key role in literacy. Students need to understand how their values are shaped by the society in which they live. Media critique, when used in a classroom setting, allows students to make a connection between their own beliefs and experiences and this powerful societal force, the media.

The Process

I divided the process of deconstruction of cultural stereotypes into three steps: identification of stereotype in the media; critique of the media presentation; and personal reflection. To begin the first step, identification of stereotype, I asked students to first think about prejudice. In one class, I asked students to fill out these surveys. The first forces students to make choices with no other information but the name of the ethnic group. The second measures social distancing, again, based on ethnic group or nationality. What I've found to be more effective, however, was a clip of The Simpsons entitled "Homer Simpson vs. the City of New York." In this episode, Homer attempts to

retrieve his car which has been "malparked" at the World Trade Center while Marge and the kids go off sightseeing. In this clip, Marge and the kids are at the Statue of Liberty. When Bart spots a ship of immigrants headed toward Ellis Island, he shouts, "Hey, immigrants, beat it. Country's full." To which the ship's steward responds, much to the dismay of those aboard, "OK, folks, you heard the lady. Back into the hole. We'll try Canada." [SHOW CLIP] I then asked students to investigate their own experience with ethnic prejudice by posing these questions for written response, "Is Bart's attitude toward immigrants reflective of American society? Has The Simpsons accurately portrayed an attitude we have of other peoples in our country?" As the students shared their ideas in class discussion, the issue of prejudice was introduced, and the origin of prejudice--stereotype--surfaced as the segue to the next activity, looking for specific examples of stereotype in the media. As a further prep for stereotype identification, I used this pre-writing activity which asked students to make beliefs and images which have been implicit, explicit:

> What words, phrases, or images come to mind when you think of an...American Indian, for example.

Next, I asked students to distinguish between common traits and fixed images by circling the phrases that described stereotypic images. Posing the question, "Where did you get these images?" ultimately landed the discussion exactly where I wanted it--focused on the media. Identification of stereotype in the media was relatively easy. In one class, I asked students to keep a journal over a four-week period of stereotypic images they found



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in newspapers, magazines, movies, talk shows. In other classes, I showed taped episodes of TV sitcoms in class.

At this point, students were ready for the next step in the deconstruction process, critique of the media presentation. I divided this step into two phases: discussion and a formal writing assignment. While keeping a journal of ethnic stereotypes focused students on media stereotypes outside of the classroom, critiquing media during classroom time enhanced the critical thinking process. Class time spent viewing a movie or a sitcom lent itself to a social interaction that journal keeping didn't. As students and I together scrutinized the images on the screen, our critical consciousness was fueled by discussion. What information does the sitcom/movie convey about the ethnic group or the culture represented? What images does this information create? Are the images positive or negative? Do these images affirm or deny your previous beliefs about this group. Do these images influence you personally? Other people? If so, how? If not, why not?

Thus, the first phase of the second step was very effective. As we talked about what we saw and the students shared their experiences with other cultures--of living on a Navajo reservation one summer where the visitors had more clothes in their suitcases than the average Navajo owned or working a grocery store where the clerks "would literally hide to avoid waiting on Orientals"--students began to compare firsthand knowledge with media representations. Sometimes these images were affirmed. Sometimes a real dissonance occurred.

The next phase of the critique step was the formal writing assignment. I asked students to analyze and evaluate the stereotypic images displayed. More specifically, I asked them to make a judgment on how the ethnic group or culture represented was being portrayed and offer specific examples which supported that judgment. With class discussions and short writing assignments as precursors to the formal writing assignment, students had little trouble identifying a Japanese woman in a kimono as a symbol of subservience or Colombian coffee grower, Juan Valdez, as a representation of latino peonage.

This step of critique is important in the deconstruction process. According to Nancy Mack, transformative pedagogy scholar, critique can be used, not only for raising critical consciousness, but also for evaluation, legitimization, and implementation (27). After students critique a social construct, they may either justify or adjust their own behavior, attitudes, and beliefs. Change is initiated through critique. Thus, critique is not an end in itself. For Mack, critique is only "one half of a dialectic between action and reflection" (27). Freire warns of the danger of reflection without acting on the knowledge gained in order to transform limiting social structures. Students must act on the insight they've gained through critique. Change needs to take place. Did change take place in the attitudes of my students? The final step of the deconstruction process, personal reflection, helped me identify change.

With the insight gained through writing about ethnic stereotypes in the media, I asked students to reflect on the effects of critique by posing these questions:

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Does the knowledge that other cultures are being stereotyped change anything? Did media critique change your beliefs or attitudes?

Kathy wrote:

I think that this activity was tremendously beneficial to me because it made me more aware of what I see (but never realized). It helped me to realize that I already have stereotypes and where I got them and how I got them. After doing this activity, I was able to think through my stereotypes and try to see what's false about them. It encouraged me to find out the truth about other people.

Karen, another student, confirms the potential for change:

Analyzing and evaluating films and TV help us understand all the different sides of the thousands of issues that tear our society apart. Knowing that the media....stereotypes other cultures upsets me. I only realized that after critiquing a sitcom. If my brain wasn't "on" and I just watched the television program passing time, then I wouldn't realize that other cultures are being stereotyped.... Unless our society realizes these...stereotypes, many people's views of foreign cultures won't change.

These student responses excited me because I saw what I had hoped would happen--self-awareness and a need for action through a process of critique. I would be remiss, however, if I suggested that all of my students were in some way changed. Ben's response indicated otherwise.

> Discussion and critique on...stereotypes in America is good for thought, but probably has little effect on the actual problem. I can logically discuss the matter

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of stereotyping other cultures and see it as foolish. However, if every Asian I know is rude, abrupt and insulting, it would be difficult to not to be suspicious of Asians as a group. It is personal experience more than discussion that shapes our views of others.

For Ben, and rightly so for many, personal experience superseded any benefit of critique. But while student responses varied as to the effect of media critique on their own lives, the common thread that ran through each response was an astute awareness of and a sensitivity to the detrimental effects of media stereotypes. While I may not have successfully reached my goal of raising each student to a level of critical consciousness that would minimize negative media effects and maximize the potential for societal change, media critique was certainly a step in the right direction.

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